

## ANTLER POINT RESTRICTIONS AND TROPHY

Deer hunting in North Dakota has evolved considerably over the last century. For many years, the state didn't even have a season. Once deer seasons became annual events starting in the 1950s, there wasn't always enough licenses for everyone who wanted to hunt.

In the mid-1970s the Game and Fish Department began managing deer in smaller units similar to those that exist today, and issuing specific buck or doe licenses. Prior to that, there were fewer, mostly larger units, and licenses were either for bucks, or "any deer," which allowed a hunter to take either a buck or doe.

In 1980, when the Game and Fish Department issued about 38,000 total deer licenses, a lot of hunters had to stay home. Now, with more than 140,000 licenses issued last fall, just about everyone who wanted to hunt deer with a rifle could do so close to home, and likely with more than one license.

While the number of licenses and season structure has changed, hunters really haven't. Most hunters prefer a buck license over a doe license, but will take a doe license if it means they otherwise wouldn't be able to hunt. And most hunters with buck licenses would prefer to tag a large-antlered deer as opposed to one with small antlers, but will take a small one rather than risk not filling a tag for the season.

It's that preference for large-antlered bucks that has led some deer hunters and deer hunting organizations to advocate, and some state wildlife management agencies to implement, management schemes that attempt to produce more big bucks than were previously part of a deer population.

More, bigger bucks.

It certainly sounds good in theory. The debate or discussion surrounding the theory is whether it actually works in practice, and what hunters have to sacrifice in order to make it work.

There is only one way for a buck, either whitetail or mule deer, to reach "quality" size, and that is for it to live long enough. The definition of "quality" varies considerably from hunter to hunter and group to group, but for the most part a buck must reach at least 2.5 years old to be classified as a "quality" animal, and probably reach 4 or more years old to reach "trophy" classification. For either of these to happen more frequently than is currently the case, hunters must not shoot smaller bucks. Reducing buck harvest, particularly for younger deer, could be accomplished in several ways.

One, states can establish antler restrictions such as points on a side or minimum inside spread, which would make 1.5-year-old bucks virtually off limits to hunters because these young deer don't typically have enough points or a wide enough antler spread the first year they have antlers.

Two, states can significantly reduce the number of buck licenses in a unit, allowing more bucks to survive to an older age because fewer would be harvested in all age classes.

Three, states can shorten seasons to reduce the number of days people can hunt, or schedule the season outside the rut, thereby reducing buck hunter success.

Four, states can restrict firearms, such as allowing only bows, muzzle-loaders or shotguns with slugs in place of center-fire rifles, which would reduce success rates for buck hunters.

Many state wildlife agencies have tried some or all of these schemes with varying degrees of success. In Tennessee, the Wildlife Resources Agency established a deer management program based on antler restrictions of a minimum four points on a side, at a large state wildlife management area. The area is only open to archery hunting, and in the first few years of the restrictions the harvest of 2.5-year-old bucks nearly doubled, from 70 in 1997 to 120 in 2002.

Hunter participation also increased over that time, while overall buck harvest decreased about 50 percent. The bottom line, at least there, seems to be that more hunters were willing to sacrifice overall harvest opportunity in exchange for a better chance to bag a larger buck.

Several western states, however, had different experiences with antler restriction zones, especially during rifle seasons when deer are often shot at when they are far away or running and antler points or spread is not easily determined. California, Oregon, Nevada, Utah, Colorado and Montana all tried and dropped antler point restrictions in the last couple of decades because studies revealed that illegal kill was from 40 to 100 percent of the legal kill.

In other words, for every 100 legal bucks taken, another 40 to 100 were killed and abandoned because they didn't meet the minimum standards.

Some western states still have some type of trophy or quality management zones, but the preferred method is limiting the number of buck licenses, without antler restrictions.

Every state is different. In some places antler point restrictions might work, and in others biologists have determined they won't work, or hunters indicate they don't want to sacrifice overall opportunity in exchange for a greater, but still not good, chance to bag a bigger buck.

As you hear and read more about antler point restrictions or trophy deer management, whether promoted by established groups or as a general concept, here's some factors to consider, From Both Sides.

# OPHY DEER MANAGEMENT

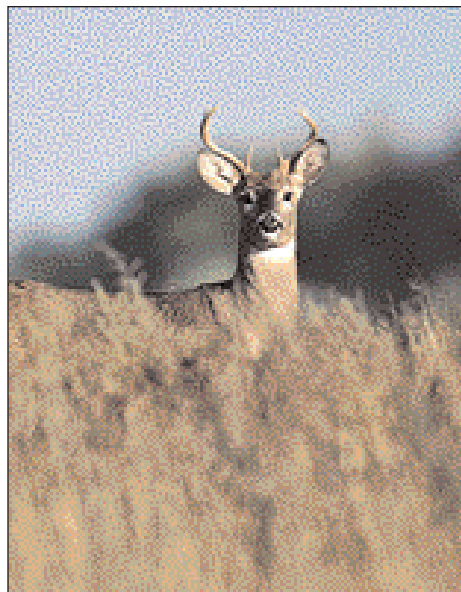
## One Side

- Managing for mature bucks can provide hunters with better odds of bagging a quality deer.
- Trophy deer management advocates increased harvest of adult does to help stabilize populations.
- Individuals who adapt trophy deer practices to their property can feel a sense of personal involvement when a large buck is taken.
- People involved with trophy deer management, on a personal or organizational level, typically work hard to improve deer habitat on their land.
- Either voluntary or mandatory antler restrictions give hunters more opportunity to observe and study bucks, adding to the hunting experience.
- Managing for larger bucks means there are more mature animals available for breeding during the rut.

## The Other Side

- The outcome of antler point restrictions has been to focus increased pressure on older bucks, instead of a harvest spread out across all age classes. If the point restriction is four on a side, this can actually produce a net decrease in the number of four-point and larger deer in the population. Bucks just under the legal limit (three points per side) tend to be the most numerous size class following implementation of this management strategy. In short, antler restrictions can produce the exact opposite result intended by the strategists.
- When antler restrictions are implemented, hunters often have difficulty counting points or judging width, leading to high abandonment rates. In California, which had antler point restrictions from the 1950s to 1990, field surveys indicated the kill of illegal bucks was similar to or greater than the harvest of legal bucks. Oregon, Nevada, Utah and Colorado are other states that documented a high illegal kill of bucks that did not meet minimum standards established by the state.
- Much of the trophy management philosophy is predicated on the assumption that (a) currently the sex ratio is skewed toward does and the habitat cannot support the current number of deer; and (b) the antlered licenses are excessive and not limited. This may be the case in some states, but it is not the case in North Dakota, where the deer herd has been managed through aggressively harvesting does and limiting available buck licenses, since 1975.
- To accomplish trophy management schemes other than antler point restrictions in North Dakota would require reducing the number of buck licenses by one-third to one-half in applicable units. This would reduce the frequency that hunters would get buck licenses.

*What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an email at [ndgf@state.nd.us](mailto:ndgf@state.nd.us); call us at 701-328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.*



CRAIG BIHRLE

*Under deer management schemes that involve antler point minimums, the young buck above would not be a legal target. The mature buck below would be a trophy to most hunters, while the deer in the middle may or may not meet minimum standards.*



CRAIG BIHRLE



CRAIG BIHRLE

# FROM BOTH SIDES